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NPIC/D-80/70

13 MAR 1970

MEMORANDUM FOR: Chief, CIA Historical Staff

SUBJECT : Suggestion for Interviewing Personages of Historic Interest
for the Record

1. Following your visit to NPIC and presentation at the meeting of the senior staff on Friday, 20 February, [redacted] Deputy Director, NPIC, called to my attention a U.S. Navy historical program that might serve as a model for a similar one in the Agency. I am, therefore, describing it to you and suggesting that you consider recommending that such a program or some modification of it be undertaken by the Agency.

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2. The purpose of the Navy program was to obtain from former high-ranking Naval officers a frank personal report and analysis of events and decisions of great historic significance in which they participated. In order to encourage emotional disengagement and a relaxation of constraints normally assumed in deference to the organization or to higher authority, these interviews were arranged some time after retirement, but before time had taken its toll or senility had set in. They were recorded on 16mm magnetic sound motion picture film or video tape.

3. The interviews were carefully planned to ensure that they were kept moving along productive lines. In each case, the interviewer familiarized himself with the subject's personal background and with the items of historical interest with which he was associated. No attempt was made, however, to structure the interview so rigidly as to discourage an uninhibited expression of facts and opinions. It goes without saying that the resulting record was subject to very discreet handling.

4. As [redacted] observed, a number of important persons who were involved in extraordinarily significant programs or who occupied key Agency positions have already retired or gone on to other places. One thinks, for example, of John McCone, Richard Bissell, and Kelly Johnson. These men and others like them are still alive and active and could provide a fascinating store of information. Some, like Kelly Johnson, are not as vigorous as they once were, thus lending a sense of urgency to the initiation of the program, if it is to realize its full potential.

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5. The Office of Training has the equipment and the technical expertise required to do the recording. The Historical Staff could provide or identify and coach the interviewers. Though it would be best to have one person designated responsible for the overall program, it would not be essential that all interviewing be done by that person. Indeed, there would be a distinct advantage to having any given interview conducted primarily by a person familiar with the man and the details or technical aspects of the programs and events with which he was associated.

6. The acquisition of a good video and audio record of such key people and their version of historic events with which they were associated would be a valuable source of information for use in the preparation of Agency history. Moreover, in the future, when most, if not all, the information will have been declassified and made available for serious study, these records should literally be priceless. Think of the privilege and the impact of sitting down to see and hear, with great fidelity, the story these men would have to tell!


Historical Officer
National Photographic Interpretation Center

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